

UNDERSTANDING CAMEROON

A CULTURAL GUIDE

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by Kathleen D. Walsh
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Introduction

Traditional Funerals: A Story

Munchili Tetndap was a troubled man. An enterprising merchant, happily married with one son of his own, he was not sleeping well. He reviewed his life. His business prospered, and in the village of Foumban, in the land of the Bamoun people, under the reign of the then Sultan Njoya, (a prestigious man himself, having more than 70 wives.) Tetndap was considered by his peers to have made it. Socially he was secure. It was his dreams that bothered him.

For the past few weeks he dreamed he was dancing a traditional Bamoun dance with the old men of the village. Among them was his father, Munchili Usman, dead some 20 years. Visions of his father disturbed him greatly and it was not unusual that he would seek consultation with the wisemen of the village, friends of his deceased father.

"Ah," said the wisemen. "It is necessary to pour a libation, to spill the palm wine, in your father's memory. It is time to begin the kitnzu," the traditional ceremonies to the dead. This made sense to Tetndap. He had heard just the other day of a group of men driving the long drive from Yaounde to Bamenda with the body of a colleague. They were bringing their friend home for a final resting. To ease their thirst on the dusty road the group stopped at a small bar for a beer. They had a good few moments at the cafe, told tales and drank some of their favorite palm wine. Refreshed they piled into the truck, but the vehicle refused to start. Such things were not unusual and they knew immediately what to do. They returned to the bar, each bought again one drink, poured the drink around the truck in memory of their parted colleague, and roared off without further delay.

Tetndap had been raised in a Muslim home, but when it came to matters of great importance, such as honoring the dead, he was not so Islamic as to ignore Bamoun tradition. After all, Christianity and Islam had been part of his people's heritage less than 150 years, while Bamoun tradition had been celebrated for as long as the people could remember. In truth, Tetndap had been for some years harboring feelings of guilt regarding the delay in celebrating his father's funeral. Although he was only the third son, Tetndap had been named by secret testament as inheritor to his father's estate. It was Tetndap's responsibility to bury his father with all the honor and respect due a parent. Tetndap just had not gotten around to fulfilling his traditional duties.

Funerals in Cameroon have a social role unfamiliar to Westerners. At the time of one's death there is a quiet and immediate burial; in tropical climates, in remote villages, a body does not keep well. Some years later, when all the necessary arrangements have been made, a great celebration is held in honor of the deceased. By remembering the dead, they continue to live. To most Africans death is hardly a final consequence of life, but rather a transition of status. According to ancient Bamoun belief, after death one does not disappear into the ground forever. Instead, the spirit of the deceased returns from time to time to roam about his homeland. Today, if you drive through the villages of Cameroon, you will see carefully tended graves and tombs in the front garden or back just behind the family home. People like to seek the counsel of the deceased and like to submit their petitions to a higher power through a loved one.

Tetndap was tormented in not having yet held a proper funeral celebration for his father. It was not that he did not want to; it was a question of money. Money seemed to slip quickly through his hands. "I work a lot without saving anything. Whenever I get some, it is gone before I can pay all my debts. I worked as an agricultural overseer on a big coffee plantation. I ran a clandestine taxi service in the bush. I also bought fish and dried meat from the Tikar to sell to the Malantouen but all if my gains came to nothing." Tetndap was not sleeping well, but it was not until three or four months after his first dream that the most alarming of his problems began.

"Each time I went to bed I would wake to find myself on the floor without knowing how it was that I had fallen from the bed. This continued to happen three or four times a week. Even my wife who sometimes sleeps with me never heard me fall." (ed. note: In Bamoun tradition a man might have more than one wife as a demonstration of that man's power and wealth. To maintain family cohesiveness each wife keeps her own small hut, visiting the husband in his hut on a prearranged schedule. For centuries this has been an agreeable living arrangement and remains a suitable lifestyle even today.)

After serious consideration of his increasingly difficult situation, Tetndap called a family meeting consisting of himself, his two brothers, and one of the Sultan's wives, she being the sister of his father. All agreed upon the need for a traditional funeral celebration. As always, the first problem was money. With some hesitation Tetndap took a loan from the "tontine," the village credit union for which Cameroon is famous, and sent out invitations to all the village chiefs and elders. The family pooled their resources to provide the food: roast chicken, freshly slaughtered goat, corn meal, cola nuts and plantains. They spent a number of days cutting palm fronds from which they fashioned small shelters under which the distinguished guests could sit without baking in the sun. They even invited a handful of foreigners, of whom I was one.

We gathered at 10:00 p.m. in the courtyard of the Palace of the Sultan, a magnificent brick mansion of courtyards and balconies. Not so long ago funeral celebrations of this sort has been the privilege of only secret clans. This evening there were small groups of children scrambling about, and most astonishingly, women. The rules forbidding our presence had been lifted under reign of the present Sultan. The night held a festive atmosphere.

The mourners were of two groups, the guards of the royal family, and the sons of the Sultan. Long ago these men were enemies. He who was able to gain political power held the rule of the kingdom in his hand. In keeping with the party-like atmosphere the men reenacted their old feuds, drew their forked swords and clashed blades. The drummers began the ancient beats, the chants rose up from the darkness and the night was filled with age-old ceremony.

In time, the Sultan appeared. A stately man of 60 years, he stood more than six feet tall. He wore his official robes, his formal cap, and for good measure an English trench coat. To honor their leader the musicians increased their tempo to a frenzy, and the singers roared out their chants. Then they fell silent. The Sultan gave his blessing and retired.

It was a ceremony from a previous century. The men were demonstrating ancient tradition, deeply held heritage. The guards were robed in the colors of the court: blue, red, and white. Each celebrant was known for his loyalty to the kingdom, each had proven his bravery by killing an

enemy in battle and taking his jaw bone as proof of the kill. Indeed, in the museum of the palace there is calabash after calabash of kings and royalty all decorated and displayed with hosts of strung jaw bones, enemies to the crown.

Traditionally, the men would have carried flaming torches and walked to the burial ground. But these men had early business appointments in town, so we piled into two small busses and sped off.

Five kilometers out of the village the group stopped at a dusty crossroad, under a waning moon. A small fire was lit and the musicians carried their battered, worn drums over to the flame to heat the skin head and thus tune their instruments. We walked the last of the path.

Ten minutes down the road the nature of the ceremony changed and the playful atmosphere subsided. Munchili Tetndap asked for a moment of quiet in which he could speak about his father.

A small man of stooping shoulders he stood in the road surrounded by his comrades. The tallest held a flashlight over him so we could all see. "He was a brave man and a true friend to his companions. He was a courageous warrior." Gentle silence filled the night. A second man spoke, more firmly this time. "Yes, I remember. We fought together and he was truly a brave man. He carries two jawbones on his calabash."

The quiet lasted a long time. Africans, unlike us westerners, do not feel the need to fill the moments with conversation. Sometimes, just being together is enough. A plate of cola nuts was presented, and everyone was invited to take one in celebration of the deceased. Everyone did. It was a crucial moment.

Tetndap had put himself in a precarious position. If no one had responded to his prayers for his father, his speech being a prayer of sorts, it would have been assumed that no one had remembered his father, that the man was truly dead, that he had no place even in the world of the ancestors. For Tetndap, this would have been a catastrophe for the sharing of cola nuts is a delicate moment. Traditionally, all men were offered the ceremonial food, but any among them who had been an unfaithful friend would fall seriously ill after eating. To eat the fruit was to demonstrate one's loyalty to the deceased.

The procession took up its march and the mirth of the evening returned. We continued to the funeral grounds and were ushered to the chairs of honor, all carefully set out alongside the deputy of the Sultan and the elders. The old men sat in splendid garb, talking softly, nodding, chuckling to themselves. A bonfire lit up the courtyard. Once again the night was filled with the deep rhythms of the drums, singing, the clashing of swords, and an occasional blast from a well-tended blunderbuss. The story of Usman's death was told with the reverence reflected in the night. How long ago did he die? "Oh," replied my host, a son of the Sultan, "it was more than 25 years ago. I remember because I was a boy and was locked in the house at 6:00 p.m. sunset, the time when the spirit of the dead prince would come to roam his courtyard in valediction." Such are the traditions of the Bamoun.

Parts of the above conversations were translated from Bamoun by Ibrahim Njoya.

UPON ARRIVAL

Welcome to Cameroon, a country unique to Africa. It is said that here one is able to find a little of everything the continent has to offer. The geography sets the stage for the variety. Indeed, Cameroon is often referred to as "Africa in miniature."

The central area, where most U.S. Government employees live, rests on a transitional plateau separating the thick tropical rain forest of the south from the grasslands of the northwest province. Here, Yaounde, the capital, sprawls across the face of seven angular mountains. The air is warm and clear year round; the vistas are spectacular. A night's journey by train will take you to the world of Islamic heritage, and the vast scrub lands which ease into the marshes that surround Lake Chad. Here is the fascination of big game: elephant, giraffe, hippopotamus, and gazelle. The south is thick with virgin rain forests, some of the last in the world. Small pygmy villages are to be found in its depths. The National Geographic film "Korup," was made here in the tropical rain forest. The coast offers long, isolated beaches of both black lava sands from the volcanic rock of Mt. Cameroon, and yellow white sands of further south, the fishing village of Kribi. The sea is clean, warm, and delightful. North of Douala, Mt. Cameroon sits in majestic command of the harbor. On the mountain are trails for hiking and even an annual foot race to the top for the stout of heart.

Almost 200 ethnic groups, speaking more than 80 major languages, co-exist in Cameroon. Three of the great religions are represented: Islam, concentrated in the north, Christianity in the central areas, and Animism, a belief in the spiritual life of all things, which penetrates even the established global religious traditions.

It would be misleading, however, to leave the reader with an impression of Cameroon as a tropical paradise. It is not. For all its natural beauty Cameroon is still a developing country. The noise, the smells, and the confusion can be unsettling to a newcomer. The tropical climate is in itself exhausting. Americans interviewed frequently commented on a recurring sense of physical and social dislocation.

In Cameroon culture and century-old traditions hold fast. It is these ancient customs mingled with the influx of the modern world which will both delight and frustrate your tour. Understanding the history and culture will augment the delights and ease the frustrations, and that is what this guide will attempt to do.

THE HISTORY

In about 300 BC, or so myth has it, one finds the first recorded notes of Cameroon. "We saw at night a land full of fire. In the middle was a lofty fire larger than all the rest touching seemingly the stars. By day this appeared to be a very great mountain called the Chariot of the Gods..." wrote Hanno, a Carthaginian sea captain exploring the coast of Africa. After watching with terror the active volcano now called Mt. Cameroon, he moved on to more inviting territory. It

was not until AD 1470 that Portuguese navigators, while searching out routes to India, made further recorded contacts with those same shores. The large river mouth into which they ventured was so wonderfully filled with shrimp that they named it Rio de Cameroones, River of Shrimp, and thus began Cameroon's modern history.

As in all historical evaluation, the geography sets the stage for the history. Bordered on all sides by almost uninhabitable deserts, the sea, or jungles, Cameroon was locked in, or locked out, for centuries. To the west is the sea, originally a barrier to travelers but later the major communication link to the rest of the world. It was the coastal lands that posed the greatest dangers to European explorers and adventurers. These hot humid swamps were and still are host to the debilitating and often lethal tropical diseases that afflicted the people of the area. Malaria, dysentery, and yellow fever were and still are common causes of death both down the coast and across the jungles of the southern borders.

To the far north were the deserts and the fierce Islamic tribes that roamed it. This northern region of Cameroon developed a social structure very different from the southern, which eventually followed a Christian-based theology. It was in the hills of what are called the northwest and west provinces, the grasslands, that the traditional social and cultural structures were most richly developed and most strongly preserved. In the grasslands, life was easier. Water-borne disease was less devastating than on the coasts and in the thick rain forests. The climate was more gentle than in the arid far north. The rich soils combined with abundant rain made possible an agricultural society that today accounts for one-third of Cameroon's total economic income.

Two thousand years ago Cameroon consisted of various clans of separate peoples. These groups existed for centuries as farmers and hunters. It was not until the opening of the great trading routes from the east that change in the basic pattern of life was possible. With the introduction of the more stable crops of bananas and yams, a developing self-sufficient agricultural society emerged. Eventually, it was this nutritional security that precipitated what is now known as the Great Bantu migration.

This great explosion in farming people, a focal point in African history, is thought to have begun in southwest Cameroon.

The Bantu, moving in a wide arch that eventually reached southern Africa, swept into empty lands and eventually displaced the smaller hunting groups. So complete is the distribution of the Bantu today, it is assumed that this migration was a peaceful assimilation, not a conquest. Such an immense process took centuries to complete. With their migration the Bantu brought their culture, just as the northern Africans on their religious conquest of later years brought their largely Islamic heritage to what is today's northern Cameroon. One finds now a definite contrast in social and cultural structure from north to south with a largely Muslim influence in the north while the traditions of the Kings and the theology of Christians hold fast in the south.

The strong links to tradition and the old ways that one finds in Northwest Cameroon today are a direct result of the divine strengths attributed to those same kings and their empires. The *Fon*, or King, was a sacred and mystical figure and typically secluded from the people. His more human side was kept very private. For example, he never ate in public. Today the same is often true,

although in typically gracious Cameroonian hospitality, he might take a drink with a high-ranking male guest. In deference to his supreme position he could be addressed only by a handful of select ministers and only through special ritual. The speaker was and still is obligated to clap three times and speak through cupped hands while standing respectfully in a bowed position. When you visit the Fons of the northwest you will see similar customs repeated. As a guest you may be expected to offer corresponding gestures of respect and deference.

Traditionally, the King's power was absolute. As King he was expected to take many wives and sire numerous children. As a result, polygamy is not uncommon today and a man still often measures his wealth in numbers of wives and children. Royal law was severe. Death by poison was one punishment for those accused of violating his rule. Maintenance of royal power was closely likened to the well being of the entire tribe, its fertility, its harvest, in essence its very survival. To insure the welfare of his people, the King and his nobles participated in numerous ceremonies and rituals to invoke the blessings of God. It is through these old traditions and systems that so much of the fabric of African society is preserved today.

The slave trade, which flourished in Cameroon from the 1500s to the 1800s, provoked further penetration of the interior. Tribal wars over living space had broken out, and a market for war prisoners developed between the Europeans and the coastal Cameroonians, the Doualas. In the mid-1800s British Baptist missionaries who had settled on the island of Fernando Po were ousted by the Jesuits and the Christianization of the interior was launched. Tribal feuding continued, the slave trade increased, and the religious zeal of the missionaries finally succeeded in cracking the traditional authority of the rulers. The Douala Kings, King Arkwa and King Bell, fearful of losing their seat as trading masters, looked in admiration toward British administration. Hedging their bets, they wrote to Queen Victoria asking her to take Cameroon under her protection. She never replied. European interest in African riches had been sparked, however, and in early 1884, the German plenipotentiary, Dr. Gustave Nachtigal, petitioned and won approval of the Kings to place Cameroon under German rule.

Interestingly, the British authorities arrived in late 1884 with the French just seven days behind.

Acceptance of German control grew slowly and with much upheaval. Chiefs and kings who had come to depend on imported goods were reluctant to give up trade routes and marketing centers. The Germans, fearing submersion, insisted on absolute authority. German became the required language of the tiny local schools. Political and religious differences soon brought conflict to kingdoms, villages, and even families.

With the defeat of the Germans in WWI, the German Kamerun Protectorate collapsed. Nearby French and British delegations quickly established their interest and divided the spoils into, "The Cameroons," with the British claiming what are today the northwest and southwest provinces of Cameroons, and a portion of Nigeria. Further debates transferred borders once again and these divisions were sanctioned by the League of Nations in 1922.

On January 1, 1960, the French Cameroons became independent, with Ahmadou Ahidjo as its first president. The British-administered territory was divided into two zones, both administratively linked with Nigeria. In a UN-sponsored plebiscite in early 1961, the northern

zone voted for union with Nigeria, and the southern for incorporation into Cameroon, which was subsequently reconstituted as a federal republic with two prime ministers and legislatures but a single president. Ahidjo became president of the republic.

In October of 1961 French Cameroon united with British Cameroon to establish themselves as the Federal Republic of Cameroon. National integration proceeded gradually. From 1961 until the spring of 1971 Cameroon was governed as a federation, with East (Anglophone) and West (Francophone) maintaining separate governments. In 1966 the dominant political parties in the east and west merged into the Cameroon National Union (CNU). In 1972 the population voted to adopt a new constitution setting up a unitary state to replace the federation. A presidential form of government was retained, but Cameroon was a one-party state, with the CNU in control. Ahidjo resigned from the presidency in 1982 and named Paul Biya as his successor. In 1984 the official name was changed to the Republic of Cameroon.

Biya established an authoritarian rule and implemented conservative fiscal policies. Opposition to his regime endured after a failed coup attempt in 1984, and his critics called for more substantive democratic reform. An increase in oil revenues resulted in greater investment in agriculture and education, but the collapse of world oil prices in 1986 prompted a variety of austerity measures. In 1985 the CNU changed its name to the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM). Following a prolonged nationwide strike in 1990, Biya ended one-party rule and initiated a multiparty system. In the nation's first democratic elections, held in 1992, Biya again won the presidency, but the result was tainted by widespread charges of fraud, and violent protests followed.

Various IMF and World Bank programs initiated in the 1990s to spur the economy met with mixed results, and privatization of state industry lagged. Critics accused the government of mismanagement and corruption. In recent years the English-speaking inhabitants of the former British provinces have sought autonomy or a return to federal government. Biya was reelected in 1997; however, his refusal to allow an independent board to organize the vote prompted the country's three main opposition parties to boycott the elections. Biya remains the current president.

In the 1990s tensions had increased between Cameroon and Nigeria over competing claims to the oil-rich Bakassi peninsula in the Gulf of Guinea. In 2002 the International Court of Justice (ICJ) awarded the Bakassi peninsula and certain areas in the Lake Chad region to Cameroon; another area in the latter region was awarded to Nigeria. Many Nigerians called for the rejection of the ICJ decision, and in 2003 Nigeria stated that it would not withdraw its troops from the peninsula for at least three years. The areas near Lake Chad, however, were swapped late in 2003, and a new border established.

The Cameroonian Government's human rights record has been improving over the years but remains flawed. There continue to be reported abuses, including beatings of detainees, arbitrary arrests, and illegal searches. The judiciary is frequently corrupt, inefficient, and subject to political influence.

THE PEOPLE

Conflicts of Tradition

Describing the people of Cameroon is as difficult a task as describing the people of the United States. Tradition and custom vary greatly from region to region, even from village to village, just as the habits and practices of Americans vary from town to town or even block to block. A tribesman from the rain forest of the southern border contrasts sharply from the nomadic Fulani of the north, much as the southern rancher differs from the Maine lobsterman.

If there is one generalization that could be safely made about Cameroon, it is that its people are in the midst of an enormous transition from things traditional to things modern, with the villagers keeping a closer guard over the old ways, and the urban centers moving rapidly toward a western lifestyle.

Cameroonians are a people bound in tradition, yet struggling to find a sense of individual values. Often a villager will have never traveled from his homeland and yet his children are educated in the finest universities of the Western world. Modern technology has found a strong toehold, but remains accessible mostly to the wealthy. Most Cameroonian homes do not have telephones, but the cell phone is becoming a status symbol, although priced out of the reach of most. The computer is changing Cameroon, but most citizens do not have easy access to a computer and do not know how to use one. Cameroonians are by their own admission suspicious of the unknown, guarded in the presence of strangers, and strongly attached to their home village; yet new roads are cutting through the rainforests and grasslands, reducing travel time from days to hours and bringing people from one geographic area to another with astonishing ease.

Such a cultural upheaval inevitably causes confusion not only for the individual but also for the nation. Those Cameroonians in a position to make observations about Cameroon and its social growth, that is those in the media or the academic world, note that among the population at large there is a new sense of questioning tradition and a careful evaluation of modern thinking. Recently, President Paul Biya suggested that a family should consider how many children it could raise and educate before having those children. That message reached every village, every mud hut.

Nowhere is this discomfort more apparent than Yaounde, the capital city. Indeed, if there is a cultural unease in Cameroon it is most apparent in Yaounde. Twenty years ago Yaounde was a small but thriving city. Its once easy paths through town are today roadways heavily congested with cars and people. There is construction on almost every unbuilt space. Vendors line the sidewalks. Water is rationed, meaning different parts of the city are cut off on a sporadic rotating basis, not because there is a water shortage but because the city cannot lay the pipelines fast enough. Despite regular trash collection, garbage lies in heaps on the street corners; the modern, efficient collecting trucks cannot get there fast enough. Once all the trash was biodegradable, but now the city is facing heaps of refuse that just will not go away.

Cameroonians will be the first to admit that they do not feel at home in Yaounde, that they return to their village whenever the opportunity arises. The practice of regularly returning to the village is perhaps a lesson to be heeded by all. If Yaounde is Cameroon's center of discord, the village is

the source of community harmony. In the village one meets his colleagues at their own level, in their own milieu. Everyone seems more relaxed. Getting out of the city and into the countryside is worth the inconvenience. Americans who accept invitations to village homes report a greater sense of cultural appreciation and a heightened commitment to their tour of duty.

From the earliest days of tribal rulers through the more recent history of colonialism and even today under the Biya administration, the lives of most Cameroonians are anchored to a powerful central authority and his royal family. Long before colonialism, that authority was the Fon or Chief of the tribe. Allegiance to the Fon was, and often still is, paramount. Disloyalty, manifested by rule infraction, was punishable by death.

FAMILIES

Cameroonians are intensely loyal to their families. By tradition the family is more important than all outsiders, including employers and neighbors. Further, Cameroonians feel that it is crucial to guard one's position in the community, to save face, and to act in accordance with expectations of family members.

Of all the admirable characteristics of the Cameroonian people, their most noteworthy must surely be their attempt to balance the old with the new. Their roots and their souls rest with their village. It is their heritage. No matter that the wealthy family's children attend private schools both in Cameroon and abroad; they are sent back to the village for important celebrations. No matter that those who can afford a car are just scraping by on car payments; they send money back to their hometown in hopes of easing strains of life there. (Most Cameroonians are very poor; good-paying jobs are difficult to find, so only the rich can afford a car. A middle class barely exists in Cameroon.) And in the end, when their civic duties are finished, they go to the village to die and be buried. To have lost one's village is to have lost one's identity.

MALE-FEMALE ROLES

Traditionally the chief or leader of the community is male. His leadership is judged by the amount of good he is able to do for his community as a whole. His status is passed on to his children. Thus to be the son of a chief is to be held in high esteem by one's fellows. Education is becoming another means to status, as is job title and salary. Age brings an extra measure of status, and elder people are honored as wise and learned. When a man feels the need for comradeship he will seek out the companionship of his male friends. After work he will meet with them in a bar or at a sports event.

Traditionally, a woman's status was linked to that of her parents, and then her husband. She gained further respect with motherhood, especially if she produced twins, twins being a special blessing of God. Today, as caretaker of the children, she is the guardian of historical and cultural tradition. Age brings her a heightened respect, as does higher education. Today's Cameroonian woman is impressive indeed, with a showing in the government, academic, and business worlds quite similar to that of American women.

Women live within a social network that is exclusively their own. A woman's closest friend is another woman. Women form groups, formal and informal. They have structured the enormously viable local credit systems—the *tontine*, an underlying economic stronghold throughout Cameroon. Women share farming and childcare duties, lending flexibility to each other's daily schedules. Husbands and wives do not usually eat together or recount the day's events long into the evening. In some Christian churches they do not even sit together. When difficulties in the marriage arise, a third party is brought in to mediate the dispute. Each sex, then, is very separate and independent of the other.

Throughout rural Cameroon it is the men who tend to grow the food considered cash crops. The women raise food needed for home consumption. Both help to clear the land. Usually the woman rears the children. It is estimated that women contribute 60 percent or more of the costs for supporting a child. In the far north, Muslim women are sheltered and confined to the family compound. Everywhere Cameroonian women are a colorful, vibrant, vital element of society.

Village activities, songs, dances and chores of the day are usually organized for one sex or the other. The great exception to this generality is women who have lived abroad. In the better-educated families male-female roles tend to be very similar to our own with educated women playing a colorful role in the political or economic arena as well as fulfilling their traditional obligations of housekeeping and childcare. Today's Cameroonian women are powerful, well spoken, and fascinating to know as colleagues and friends.

FAMILY

It is necessary to understand the definition of family. The Cameroonian family is not the nuclear group as we know it, but rather a community consisting of all distant relatives and most of the people of one's village. Traditionally, what benefits fall to one person are to be shared by all; what hardships that come to one are borne by one's fellows as well. One such obligation is that of sharing one's home or even one's bed. Customs differ widely from tribe to tribe. For the people of the northwest province the arrival of a sister-in-law obliges the husband to afford her all the privileges he as head of the house enjoys: the best food, the best wine, the most comfortable bed. Thus, a man will often give up his bed and sleep on the sofa. For the Ewonde, the tribe of Yaounde, it is the wife who allows her sister the wife's privileges, and the wife's bed.

MARRIAGE

Marriage is a tradition whose concepts are basically similar to ours. In Cameroon, however, a marriage is not made between individuals; it is made between families. (Let this be a word to the wise for those of romantic inclination.) In marriage one does not join with a spouse alone; one marries into an entire family and all the obligations that family life entails.

The idea of a romantic attraction before marriage did not traditionally exist although it is becoming more popular. Rather, a man chose a bride for good character, supposed fertility, and enthusiasm for work. Women had little say in the matter. Love was and is considered an aspect of marriage which would come in time, which would be learned. Sexual attraction and passion exist both within and without the marital framework. The bonds of marriage as we know them,

communication and mutual support of one spouse for the other, are slowly becoming part of the modern-day lifestyle.

POLYGAMY

Not so long ago a man could demonstrate his wealth and power by the number of his wives and children. The more wives he had the more fields he could cultivate; the more children, the more secure was his old age. The previous Sultan of Foubam, King Njoya, had about 60 wives and hundreds of children. A polygamous household is organized to ensure efficient administration of the royal family. An older wife, often the first wife, supervises the women and thus establishes a hierarchy in the family. In the palace of the Fon each woman maintains a house of her own. At the place of the Sultan, one can see and sometimes visit the women's quarters—dozens and dozens of small, neat huts tucked onto the confines of the palace walls.

Today a man might have two or three wives, one or more in the village and one in the city. Often he will support a first wife and a young, Western-educated second wife with whom he is seen at business affairs. A modern bridal couple writes into the marriage contract whether or not the marriage is to be polygamous.

CHILDREN

Children are a part of everyday life. There is no great fuss made over them as there might be in the United States. There are a few special privileges awarded them. They are always around but rarely the focus of attention.

Cameroonians have a carefree, unstructured childhood. From their earliest years they are assigned household tasks and chores. It is not uncommon to see a girl of six or seven years carrying a toddler on her back or otherwise assuming a large responsibility for a young child. Discipline is often harsh, and the opportunity for experimentation or new experience is limited, of course, to the environment around them.

During a reception children might be present but they will be attended to by someone other than the host. At a dinner party they will eat apart from the adults. They are usually not included in invitations to Cameroonian homes or official American functions. They are delighted, on the other hand, to be invited to a backyard picnic or a film showing.

DOMESTIC HELP

Hired help is easily found in Cameroon, and most Americans feel that the employment of a cook or part-time maid is of invaluable assistance. Chores and maintenance of a tropical household while working in development are numerous. A cultural conflict arises when what we expect from our help is an honest day's labor for a decent hourly wage. What we forget or do not understand is that our servants anticipate a good deal more.

As an employer you will be seen as a kind of honorary “uncle.” Your employee might enjoy telling you about the joys of his life, the family births and weddings, the graduations and job

promotions; he will also feel free to ask you for salary advances, loans, or gifts to cover his many expenses. You will want to feel equally as comfortable in your reply.

Requests for cash for funerals, medical care or school fees are not uncommon. It is a good idea to judge carefully how much money you are willing to lend, to how many persons. You will also want to make clear your terms for repayment.

Requests for extra time off are usual. In Cameroon life expectancy is about 47 years and infant mortality 11.3%. You can expect frequent demands for leave to care for sick relatives or to attend family funerals. These are crucial cultural activities to Cameroonian families. It is up to you clearly to establish how much time you can allow to be taken away from work and whether or not salaries will be docked. There are government regulations for leave, but Americans tend to be more generous than the law requires.

As an employer you are expected to provide cash bonuses during the holidays and at end of service, as well as contribute a monthly percentage of salary to the social security system.

The Ambassador and the DCM provide their servants with uniforms, showers, soap, towels and deodorant.

AMERICAN WOMEN IN CAMEROON

Generally speaking, an American woman in a traditionally male role, such as that of a career person, will suffer a few initial awkward moments. Urban Cameroonians will most likely afford her the credits of her office and respond favorably to her professionally with a respectful attitude. In a rural setting the process might take longer. A common error on the part of the Cameroonians might be to address your invitations as "Mr." or assume that the man accompanying you is in charge. A gracious response is to take no offense, as none is intended; simply proceed with your affairs.

An older woman will have more initial status, as will a mother. Young, single women may find that they will have to prove their worth before they are taken seriously. One Cameroonian interviewed had a unique response. "Why should I mind [that she is female]? She works. She is a man just like me."

ART IN CAMEROON

From the northwest province of Cameroon comes a profusion of art. Stools, masks, statues, spearheads, goblets, and bowls are all decorated to tell the story of the people, to offer a bit of their history. Familiarity with some of the common symbols of Cameroonian art makes a carving, sculpture, or painting an especially exciting adventure into an unfamiliar world.

The Lizard

The lizard symbolizes wisdom. A reptile known to live in houses, his mission is seen to be the destruction of pests, such as ants and cockroaches. To the Oku, the Bamoun, the Tikar, and the Kom, the lizard is a sign of wisdom.

The Cowrie

The cowrie shell symbolizes royalty. In ancient times it was used as currency. Later it decorated the wives of Kings and even the King himself. Originally, the wives of the King wore belts of cowrie shells to symbolize their position in the community. Later, as western pressure for modesty obliged women to clothe themselves, the cowrie was made into bracelets and necklaces. Today it is found as decoration to carvings and masks.

The Frog

The frog symbolizes fertility to the Nso women. To the Bamoun it means good luck. The toad, on the other hand, is considered a loathsome creature.

The Double-Headed Serpent

The double-headed serpent, or snake, symbolizes power. Its double head represents the simultaneous victory of the Bamoun over their enemies, the Foubes in the north, and the Bameleke in the south. To this day the double-headed serpent is seen as a symbol of the Sultan of Foubam.

The Double Gong

The double gong meant war to the Bamoun. Whenever the kingdom was under attack the King sounded the alarm with the double gong. Today the double gong is a symbol of the power of the King. It is often used as a musical instrument as well.

The Spider

Because of his web, within which he is safe from all enemies, the spider symbolizes peace and security, even industry. There is a second story about the spider: Some say he is a symbol of wisdom because he is able to communicate with the ancestors by dropping into small holes and cracks in the earth where spirits might possibly dwell. In silence he is able to listen carefully to their private conversations and then do what no mortal can do, return to earth.

The Buffalo

The buffalo, for obvious reasons, is a symbol of power and strength to the Bafut. In their traditional dances the buffalo mask is often present.

The Leopard

The leopard is largely represented as a symbol of strength. His skins adorn a King's bed; his image is carved into many a throne.

The Cock

The cock is a symbol of time to the Bamoun and the Bameleke.

The Pipe

The pipe symbolizes majesty. The pipe of the Fon is traditionally decorated with the symbolic carvings of his office.

The Drinking Horn

The drinking horn also symbolizes majesty. When the Fon wished to drink, he was ceremoniously presented with an elaborately carved drinking horn. Today a cow's horn is not uncommonly used for celebration.

COMMUNICATION

Oral Literature

One of the great traditions of Cameroon still existing today is that of oral literature. Long before the African languages were written people would gather together in the evening to refresh themselves with tales of their ancestors, heroic epics, and narratives of their cultural history. Far from being something mysterious or different, these tales were a representation of the everyday life of the people, peculiar as some of its examples might seem to us.

At one time, even 30 years ago, stories and myths, especially those of historical value, were told by a special group of men, the griots, the bards of their time. They learned the narratives and the performance of their tales from an old master, often an uncle or close family member. Such tales and epics were not simply told; they were reenacted, and all the audience took an active part by chanting and singing and calling out refrains. It was a theater of a sort, a drama all its own.

These stories were told in the evening, for night is the time when the spirits of the tales move most freely, whereas telling stories during daylight hours would be a sign of great disrespect. In fact, it was said that to do so would result in the immediate death of one's uncle.

If the story that was to be told was of a dangerous nature, the villagers would take security precautions and place a pan of water in their midst, or mark their gathering spot with a ring of ashes to ensure their safety. In those days a story of danger was danger itself; one would be foolish to discount its threat. Indeed, to this day, a villager might put a bowl of water under the bed of a crying child, for it is said that children are more aware of the metaphysical world than adults are, that children can see what we cannot.

Water has long been an international symbol of life-giving force. So, too, are ashes recognized as a sign of man's immortal soul. Unlike Westerners, Cameroonians do not need to have the water or ashes blessed; such natural elements are seen as blessed by their very existence.

There is a thought that things traditional are of another time, and that the Cameroonian has to catapult himself into the modern world or be left behind in the old. Life in Cameroon is far more complex, far more intertwined; the old mixes with the new. The individual, although often undecided between one life style or another, is most often at ease in both situations, shifting back and forth as opportunity permits. It is common, then, that a storyteller might weave an old theme with bits of today's news, not unlike a modern-day politician.

Today most of the old stories have been buried alongside their tellers. The young men of talent and creativity have turned away from village life to seek a place in the business world, the city. In Cameroon as in the rest of the world, the key to success is money.

Women are the keepers of the tales now. They are the link between the old and the new, the thread of constancy in a culture in transition. Stories are still told, often to children, and often about animals. Unlike Western fables, where might makes right, or slow and steady wins the race, the tricksters tell us that the world is largely unfair and there really are no happy endings. It is a significant cultural difference. An example of a trickster tale is "The Elephant and the Tortoise," as translated by Kashim Tala, professor of African literature at the University of Yaounde.

THE ELEPHANT AND THE TORTOISE

Once upon a time the animals were arguing about who should be chief over them. After all, each of them had qualities which the other did not have. Some suggested the hare because of his speed. Others suggested the tortoise for his intelligence, others proposed the lion for his strength, but others preferred the elephant for his dignifying size.

A meeting of these animals was summoned to decide this vexing issue. All of them came except the tortoise. They all looked round to be sure. The tortoise was absent. But the matter could not be settled in the absence of any animal. They did not want any argument afterwards. So they decided to go and tell him to come. When the hare reached the tortoise's home he found the tortoise lying down on his bed looking very ill. But the illness was only feigned. The hare asked him why he had not gone to the meeting. The tortoise answered, "Eh, my brother, can you in this state move the long distance to the meeting? Besides I even forgot the date."

The hare offered to carry him to the meeting but the tortoise objected saying: "You with your high speed, do you want to finish and kill me? Your fast movement will shake me too much. I may die before the meeting takes place. No I cannot come with you. If my presence is really necessary then I'd prefer to be carried by a gentle moving animal like the elephant who will not shake my intestines.

The hare hearing this ran away with the message. He went and reported it to the animals.

Since the elephant was anxious to take over the chieftaincy he quickly opted to go and bring the tortoise. The elephant went. The Tortoise climbed on his back. The tortoise comfortably installed himself there. The tortoise was carrying his bag with him in which he had secretly put his red feathers and his cap. When the elephant was drawing near the place where all the animals were meeting, the tortoise quickly pulled his cap out of his bag. He fitted the feathers on the cap and wore it on his head.

When the animals that were assembled saw the tortoise well dressed in this symbolic way, being carried by the elephant, they burst out cheering and singing. The elephant was surprised. He halted. The tortoise descended majestically from the elephant's back. All the animals ran up to him, raised him up on their shoulders, sang, danced, sang, danced. The tortoise was placed on the high throne of the animals. Even the elephant found it difficult to protest. The tortoise became the chief of the animals. To address him you must say "*Mbee*."

Language

Cameroon, anyone will tell you, is a bilingual country—but they will tell you in French. The English-speaking areas, those of the northwest and southwest provinces, comprise less than one-quarter of the population, and despite Cameroon's official bilingual policy, the use of French is prevalent. Thus every hour of French language you take will be worth your while.

It is not unusual to ask a question in English and receive the answer in French. Bilingualism in Cameroon has meant that everyone speaks the language in which he is more comfortable. English is gaining greater respect. University students are expected to attend classes in both languages.

The television news, Cam TV, is presented in both French and English, and on the whole French gets more air time. English, however, wins prime TV time, and the English news often provides a more liberal view of world events.

In French conversation the usual confusions over the correct use of *tu* and *vous* frequently occur. The accepted rule of thumb is to extend the courtesy of the more formal pronoun.

Francophones have suggested:

Children use *tu* to other children.

Adults use *tu* to children.

Children use *vous* to adults, until an adult suggests using *tu*.

Adults use *vous* to all other adults, whether in business or social contacts. If a friendship develops, the Cameroonian will sense when to switch to *tu*, and the American can follow. In some cases, friends use *vous* in the office and *tu* in social settings.

Greetings

In Cameroon everyone seems to shake hands with everyone. (Note that some Muslim men refuse to shake hands with women.) Cameroonians will greet everyone in the room with a handshake, regardless of whether or not they have ever seen you before or if you are introduced. If you see

someone you know or even think you know, go over and shake his hand and remind him where you have last met. As Americans in Cameroon we battle a host of old suspicions from the colonial days. One of these is that Europeans do not like to touch blacks. Leave no doubts; offer your hand when you meet a friend. The French greet acquaintances with kisses and this, too, is acceptable. Notice a different handshake used by older men. They may hold the right hand to the heart, shake hands, hold the right hand to the heart, and shake hands again. Though it's a traditional form of greeting, foreigners are not expected to use it. If you and a Cameroonian are getting on well, expect a special kind of handshake. Shake hands, and, as you pull your hand back, snap the other person's middle finger with your thumb. Both people do this simultaneously.

Titles differ between the Anglophone and Francophone sections of the country. In the Anglophone area, use the titles "Mr.," "Mrs.," "Miss," "Doctor," "Mayor," and "Professor." The following titles of respect are used in Francophone areas: Docteur (for a medical doctor); Monsieur le maire (mayor); Professeur (professor or teacher); Monsieur le Directeur (for the principal of a school; principals are appointed by the President of Cameroon and have the status of governors); and *Fon* or Chief, for the chief of a tribe. In French-speaking sections, the appropriate titles are "Monsieur," "Madame," and "Mademoiselle" with the first name. Anyone woman over 25 will be called "Madame," unless the Cameroonian knows she isn't married. Be prepared for first names to be used very soon after you meet someone.

Note that in the Anglophone section, "You are there!" is a common greeting, the equivalent of "Hello." In departing, people often say "I'm coming," meaning "I'm leaving."

Conversation

There are certain cultural insights to keep in mind when entering into a conversation with a Cameroonian. For example, expect women to look down when talking to another person, even to another woman. They never look anyone else in the eye. Also, be prepared for conversation to be accompanied by beer drinking. If you don't want to drink beer, ask for something else. When opening a conversation, always ask about the man or woman's family, household, health, children—an interchange that can go on for a long time. Expect to be asked if you are married, have children, etc.

There are some conversational taboos you are wise to recognize in order to avoid uncomfortable moments. Don't joke about people who are physically challenged or mentally impaired. Cameroonians think it rude to laugh at a disabled person. (People with disabilities are not ostracized as they are in much of the West. They often try to do a great deal for themselves—e.g., a woman who was born with no legs and one arm ran a bar and served people.) Also, never speak to a woman—even a close friend—about being pregnant because women in Cameroon are very superstitious about pregnancy. Avoid such questions as, "When is your baby due?" And finally, remember that the term "bush" means out in the middle of nowhere. Never use the term because Cameroonians will be insulted. Instead, refer to a place being "in the country."

Cameroonian Gestures and Their Meanings

Hand signals in Cameroon offer another world of communication and although Americans do not often use them, familiarity with their meaning is a valuable asset. Again, the explanations below are general in nature, and more often found in rural areas than in the larger cities:

Blowing of closed lips means a negative response, no, or not at all.

Up and down motion of the left fist with thumb extended in front of the body means a sign of encouragement or that all is well.

A fist pounded with an open palm means an overabundance, or a filled capacity.

Scratching the palm with the index finger when shaking hands can be a sexually suggestive gesture.

Waving both hands greets a group of friends.

Wiping the mouth with the forefinger means you have eaten and it was good.

Making a slapping noise of a finger snap with a handshake is a sign of friendship.

Friends grasping each other's hand above the head level is a traditional greeting for good friends.

When music is playing, clapping both hands and putting ones palms up asks a partner to dance.

Rubbing the forefinger and middle fingers with the thumb refers to money.

Fingertips on the inside part of the arm indicates size.

First holding the hand open and then closing the fist with the palm down means come.

Expression of Emotion

Anger is one of the more difficult emotions for Westerners to express to Cameroonians. An outraged employer may find that his employee is so uncomfortable with the anger expressed that the employee will smile or, even more disconcerting, laugh outright. In Cameroon angry people are considered amusing. If in the market place you slip and fall unharmed into the mud and come up cursing the fates, people around you will clutch their bellies and roar.

In public gatherings, anger provokes anger. At soccer matches, after fenderbenders, and even on the street, fist fights occasionally break out. Perhaps the best way to deal with anger is to state firmly but in a controlled manner your feelings. Direct threats of a violent nature, for example, "I'll kill you the next time," are shocking to the Cameroonian as, initially, they are taken seriously.

Grief is another emotion that is handled differently by Cameroonians than by Americans. Upon news of a family death—and there are many in a population where infant mortality is 11.3

percent and the life expectancy is 47 years—a person may begin loud and dramatic wailing. At funerals men and women will weep openly.

Strange as some funeral customs might seem to us, there are outer rituals which strike one as deeply warm and humane. The mother of a dead infant or child will often cradle and sing to the child for hours after its death. No one forbids her this right; grief is to be spent. Family members are usually buried in the garden of their village home. Here close to the family home, they can be visited frequently and the grave can be kept up in a manner befitting a loved one. Memorial services held yearly after someone's death are a common practice.

At traditional funeral services there is much celebration, dancing, singing, drinking, and feasting. An invitation to a traditional funeral ceremony should not be easily put aside as it offers an entrée into the world of ancient customs and rites that are fading from the modern day. Masks and costumes are a common part of the ceremony, as are chants, singing, and tales of the deceased. A traditional funeral, known as a crydie, is an often very exotic and exciting opportunity for the visitor to Cameroon.

At all funeral services the atmosphere is formal. Black is the acceptable color of grief or respect for the grieving. Be sure you wear a dark dress or suit. Your presence, your willingness to sit long into the night with a grieving family, will establish a warm and lasting bond of appreciation that will outlast many of your more official duties.

If by some tragedy a member of your own family dies while you are at post, you will be graciously comforted by Cameroonian friends and even acquaintances. You can expect them to gather at your home and sit for hours. Conversation will not be expected. Your guests will want only to be with you and share your sorrow. The same demonstration of grieving might also occur upon your departure. Depending on your relationships with Cameroonians and depending on their degree of Westernization, you might find that a small group will gather while you pack. They just want to be with you.

CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

Space

Space needs for Cameroonians differ depending on the group and the occasion. At dinner or cocktails people seem to like about the same amount of elbow room as we do. The street, however, is a different matter completely. In a home you are a friend and a guest; hospitality reigns. On the street or at a sports match you are a stranger and you can expect to be pushed, jostled, and even squeezed by a crowd.

Time

Time just does not carry the same sense of urgency in Cameroon as it does in the United States. Those U.S. Government employees interviewed observed that, "moving forward in a Western fashion is much like pushing a wet noodle up a hill." Guests are often late. Sometimes they do not come at all. Their absence is rarely a sign of disinterest; nor should it discourage you from

sending further invitations. There are few private phones, fewer public phones, no street names or signs, and scant public transportation. Expect delays or no shows, and you will not be disappointed.

Note the two definitions of time: (1) “white man time” means “on time”; (2) “black man time” means one to two hours late or more.

SOCIAL OCCASIONS—PRIVATE

Invitations

Yaounde is a formal city in much the same way that Washington, DC, is socially conscious. Printed invitations to luncheon, dinner, or cocktails are the *modus operandi*. Name cards are indispensable. Because the city is growing so very rapidly, invitations often include a xeroxed map to the host's residence.

Receiving Guests

Despite the modern-day trend away from old Foreign Service tradition, in Cameroon a singular act of good will is an invitation to your home for dinner or coffee. Cameroonians are affable guests and usually easy to talk with. They like to hear about you and your family. It used to be said that family and religion were the easiest topics to address, but stay away from politics. In the last few years, this situation has eased and, once you have established a friendly relationship, Cameroonians tend to talk about their political and economic thoughts and speculations. Politics still remain a delicate after-dinner subject, so it is best to let your guest lead the discussion.

Television has prompted a more open political feeling with its roundtable discussions and "friends chats" with the President. But people still go to jail for deprecatory political statements, and you will want to maintain the confidence of your guests.

Friendships of a political nature take time. If you bombard a guest with a dozen political questions on your first meeting, you can expect that he will remain unusually silent and aloof.

A guest should always be offered a drink. The weather is hot the year round and a welcome refreshment is a cool drink. Potable water is not available by tap, and a drink becomes a precious gift. Traditional drinks include palm wine and homemade beer, but today people enjoy fruit juices as well as soft drinks and liquors. Cameroonians like to see the bottles opened and the drinks poured, although they would never comment if you mix drinks in the kitchen. These customs stem from interesting stories of old rivalries and poisonings.

Cameroonians are pleased to try American cuisine, but are comforted, as we are, to find a few familiar items on the table. Rice is a well-known favorite, as is baked fish or roast beef. Cameroonians do not eat as many sweet pastries as we do, and they find fruit more refreshing after a meal. If you want to serve pork, check the guest list to be sure you have not invited any persons of Muslim background. Paper plates and cups are not used in formal gatherings

It is through personal invitations and a true interest in knowing Cameroonians that you will enjoy the benefits of their friendship. In time you will receive invitations to Cameroonian homes, and it is through these sorts of relationships that ground work for a satisfying tour is laid.

Visiting Friends at Home

Researcher Judy Brown, PhD, writes, "In some homes, special seats are reserved for chiefs or dignitaries so a visitor should wait to be shown where to sit. When visiting an important chief, it is wise to ask in advance about proper procedures." For example, some traditional leaders do not accept handshakes as they are forbidden to touch common folk. Generally, a more formal dress is appropriate; skirts for ladies, and ties for the gentlemen. One never crosses his or her legs in the presence of a traditional leader.

Dr. Brown continues her observations stating, "A visitor, invited or uninvited, will always be offered a drink and often a meal as well. If possible, a foreigner should try to taste every food, but he is not expected to eat large amounts." In fact it is quite normal for a Cameroonian visiting away from home to ask the ingredients of a meal. If a certain food or drink is forbidden to him by tradition, or if he simply does not eat it, he can say politely, "My family never eats this," or "Ce n'est pas mon habitude." The host will not be offended.

Every Cameroonian from age six on knows that he may be called on to make a toast and a speech at any time—and they're very good at toasting. A 15-minute speech is not unusual. As a foreigner, you will probably be asked to offer a toast; even if you're not, it's polite to stand and offer a toast—especially if you're an honored guest.

The gizzard of a fowl is a choice piece of meat reserved for men, elders, and guests. The person receiving it may eat it alone, or he may cut it and share with a few others. As the visitor, you'll be considered the person of status and will be offered the gizzard. If you don't want to eat it, say, "Thank you very much, but I feel that there's someone more deserving than I." Then give the food to the oldest person at the table.

Sometimes the woman of the house does not eat with her husband and guests. She may be following tradition, or she may just prefer to do the preparation and serving. A foreign woman visitor will probably eat with the men because she will have a higher status than local women.

In the Muslim area in the north, don't drink alcohol in the presence of a Muslim unless he drinks also. In addition, to follow local custom, smoke only in the evening, after dinner.

There are no rules for how long a visitor should stay. Even a very short visit is appreciated when a friend is sick, or when you happen to be passing through the neighborhood. On the other hand, evening visits and parties may extend far into the night.

The host is responsible for the comfort of his guest as long as the guest is on his land. For that reason the gracious host will walk his guest right to the car.

SOCIAL OCCASIONS—PUBLIC

Dress

If anything is disturbing to Cameroonians about our dress, it is our casual attitude toward it. More formal dress shirts and ties, dress and pumps are considered a sign of respect for the host country.

For casual wear, women should wear loose summer dresses or cotton pants. Tops could have short sleeves but should not be sleeveless. Men should wear long pants and a shirt.

In a public setting shorts are never truly regarded as appropriate dress for either men or women. Joggers are the exception, as are *les sportifs*. There are dozens of Cameroonian joggers. To wear shorts or a halter top downtown is to invite hoots and stares. To the more conservative it is quite the same as displaying your underclothes. A common practice for sportswomen is to carry a wrap-around skirt in the glove compartment lest you are forced to stop on the way home from a tennis match. A Cameroonian friend might be much too polite to mention your casual dress. He will assume that you do not understand local customs, or knowing them, you choose to ignore their significance.

Trousers for ladies are common; bluejeans are popular but uncomfortably warm. If it's hot, an acceptable costume for men is the African suit, also called an "up and down." The suit has pants with a matching long- or short-sleeved shirt, which is more fitted than a regular shirt and is worn outside the pants. Men may wear this outfit for business, if the fabric of the suit is of high quality. Children older than 12 are seen as adults and should dress accordingly.

Eating Out

In Yaounde you'll find French, Italian, Tunisian, Lebanese, and Asian restaurants. Douala also has a number of ethnic restaurants.

Keep in mind these distinctions: In the French section of the country, bars are called *bars licenciés*; in English-speaking areas, a bar is a place where there is dancing. A bar as we know it is called an off-license, where the only alcohol served is beer.

At better restaurants, you'll have a table to yourself. To summon the waiter, either hiss (the local custom), or say, "Excuse me." Don't call out "Garçon" or "Boy." If you see "bush meat" on the menu, the term refers to anything a hunter shoots—e.g., antelope or monkey.

If you suggest to someone that he or she join you for a meal, *you* pay. If the other person suggests the meal, let her/him pay. (A Cameroonian woman would probably invite you to a meal in her home, but groups of women may dine out together.)

In markets, you can get grilled mackerel and sauce or soya, which is like beef shish kebab. Be sure that the soya is hot in temperature. If it isn't, it's been standing around for a long time.

In villages, in little restaurants attached to homes, you can order skewers of meat with French fries and beer. At the roadside, you'll find women selling grilled fish with spicy dressing. Be sure the fish is hot in temperature.

BOX:

LOCAL SPECIALTIES

Koki: black-eyed peas with spinach, palm oil, and spices in the form of a cake, eaten with boiled green plantains

Stew: fresh tomatoes with garlic, ginger, and vegetable oil eaten with rice, potatoes, plantains, or yams (which are not like American yams but are a root like cassava)

Jammu-jammu: a thick, slimy stew of spiced spinach-like leaves served with a *fufu*, and if the family is rich, a bit of meat (scoop out a ball of *fufu* with your right hand, and dip it into the *jammu-jammu*)

Piment: a hot oily pepper sauce that looks like salad dressing, is always served with meals

Achu: specialty of the northwest; made of pounded cocoyam and filled with palm oil, ashes, limestone, and hot pepper. The porridge-like substance is formed into a mound, with a crater in the middle. Take one finger, scoop up the cocoyam, and dip it in the sauce in the crater. Don't spoil the crater so that the sauce runs out.

Hotels

Be aware that hotels are either at the high end or the low end of the comfort/amenities scale. There is little in between. At major hotels guests are served a continental breakfasts; it's included in the room rate.

Don't expect to find hotels in small towns. Ask a restaurant if there are rooms for rent there or if the staff knows of someone who rents.

Tipping

At a restaurant, check to see if the service is included in the bill. If not, at better or medium-priced restaurants, leave a tip of 10%. Don't tip taxi drivers. At a hotel, give a person who calls for a taxi for you the equivalent of 50 cents to U.S. \$1.00. If you ask a child to do a chore for you, give her/him the equivalent of 15 to 25 U.S. cents.

In the Anglophone section, the word "dash" is used loosely to mean a tip or a bribe.

Photography

Photography is a sensitive issue. If you're going to be taking photographs, bring a zoom lens, if possible, so that you can be discreet. Random use of your camera is likely to provoke a most

unpleasant response from your subject and a possible clash with the police. You might be lucky and lose just your film. In 1974 the Ministry of Information and Culture declared that "picture taking is permitted countrywide." This was later amended to exclude areas of "national territory," and "sensitive areas." Thus, all photos of military personnel or operations are prohibited, as are train stations, airports, and bridges. Of an equally sensitive nature are photos of open air markets, traditionally dressed people, run-down areas of town, or beggars.

Cameroonians have been photographed for years and years. They rarely receive a copy of the photo, and they hear that the photographers make large sums of money selling the pictures. They fear that they are being ridiculed or mocked by a chance photographer. If you want to photograph a person, ask him first. Pay him a token sum, if he requests it. Respect the rights of those people who refuse to be photographed because they are afraid that their soul will be taken away.

If you would like to photograph the downtown area, apply for an authorized statement of permission from the Ministry of Culture. If you are considering a serious photographic exposé, you might consider hiring the company of an off-duty police officer.

BOX:

HOLIDAYS AND SPECIAL OCCASIONS

The following holidays are observed in Cameroon:

New Year's Day—January 1

Youth Day—February 11

Labor Day—May 1

National Day—May 20

Feasts of the Assumption—August 15

Christmas—December 25

The following days are observed in accordance with the Muslim calendar: Ramadan; the end of Ramadan celebration; the Festival of Sacrifices (69 days after Ramadan).

A *Cry Die* is a celebration of a person's life after he/she has died. The commemoration may take place even five years after the death, because it costs a great deal of money for food, drink, etc. A *Cry Die* is a public event, so participate—eat, drink, and dance—if you see one. It's customary to bring whiskey, wine, or beer to help the family defray expenses.

GIFTS

Gifts are a part of traditional life. They are a way to show one's respect and share one's good fortune. Gifts are often offered when someone has a child, is married, is baptized or dies. You might bring a gift when you visit someone in a village.

Gift Suggestions

Childbirth: The bridal couple often keeps a list of gifts given. If you wish to give money, check the list to assess an appropriate amount. Other suitable gifts are special foods or household items.

Baptism: A holy card, rosary, jewelry for the child.

Death Celebration: You will be warmly received should you choose to attend a death celebration of a friend or neighbor. Very close friendship may require short visits to the house of the bereaved. A close friend can give food or money. Even a casual friend attending the celebration will be expected to contribute toward the financial costs of the ceremony.

A Village Visit: Take items not available in the village: salt, soap, bread, rice, or fresh cheese.

Hospitalization: You might consider a visit to the hospital if a friend or a friend's child is ill. Go if someone close to you has given birth. It is not expected that you will bring a gift, but a special food is a nice token of concern.

Christmas: The custom of exchanging gifts at Christmas is not common in Cameroon as it is in the United States. Normally, people visit one another and food and drink are offered to all. Christmas cards are becoming popular with the upper-class population. A particularly nice touch is to send a traditional American greeting card.

Birthdays: Older Cameroonians often do not know their exact birth dates and they are faintly amused by the birthday custom. Younger Cameroonians might remember a spouse's birthday with a small gift. For children, however, the Western tradition of birthday parties is common.

The dash or "candau": A "dash" is a form of informal gift not known in the United States. The most common dash occurs in the marketplace. When you buy a large amount of something, the seller might add a small additional amount. That is your dash. You may in turn offer the seller an extra bit of money above the agreed-upon price. A dash may also be given when someone offers a particularly kind show of assistance, such as when someone stops to help you with a car breakdown, for instance.

GETTING AROUND

Personal Vehicles

Certainly, the greatest danger to your health while in Cameroon is an automobile accident. Once a small, quiet city, Yaounde has in the past years become heavily congested with traffic. Traffic jams and snarls are now common. There are few rules of the road and there are no required safety standards. Fenderbenders are an everyday affair; major accidents are a constant possibility. Potholes abound. At first, driving can be an unnerving experience, but you will soon learn to drive defensively. Always wear a seatbelt. Always strap in children.

The Cameroonian warning signal for "danger ahead" is a leafy branch lying in the road or hanging from the end of a car.

Be alert. A branch in the road means slow down. Stock your vehicle with reflective triangles, a first aid kit, and a heavy duty flashlight. Always bring these items with you.

Cars

The Post Report indicates a small sedan-type car is sufficient for everyday use. There is a general agreement, however, that a larger fourwheel drive vehicle offers a much greater opportunity for countryside traveling. Also, the stronger body and heavy duty suspension of a four-wheel drive provides greater protection should you be hit by a bus or truck. Locally available four-wheel drive models include Mitsubishi, Toyota, and Suzuki.

Unleaded fuel is unavailable in Cameroon. Spare parts are hard to find and very expensive when available. An American automobile is almost impossible to service. Air conditioning is a desirable option.

Public Transportation

Embassy employees are discouraged from using any form of public transportation, including taxis. Travel is dangerous.

Minivans

Surely the most exciting means of travel in Cameroon is the Japanese van, a modern version of the old mammie wagon, or bush taxi. These miniature buses speed from village to village with remarkable frequency. Packed with as many people as they can possibly hold and loaded with every imaginable kind of gear from a simple valise to live goats and chickens, they are an astonishing defiance of Newton's theories of gravity and motion. Only the very young and adventurous take the vans.

Bicycling

From time to time one sees a professional bicyclist pedaling from city to city. Bicycle racing is popular among Cameroonians. Treacherous morning traffic and astonishingly deep pot holes prohibit routine biking to work.

IN CASE OF EMERGENCY

Upon arriving at post learn where the safe places are. These will include homes of neighbors, European, and Cameroonian friends, the Embassies, the Cultural Centers, the USAID and GSO buildings, the Peace Corps offices, the Marine house, and the International School. These offices are scattered about town offering a safe nook in every corner. Safe places are places you know and are known in. They are not the police station or military headquarters.

Because road congestion is most always heavy, it could reasonably be assumed that during an emergency traffic would come to a complete halt. Learn the back roads. Yaounde has an entire

set of secondary roads, rutted and dirt, that could provide alternate routes. Here is where a four-wheel drive vehicle would be very handy.

Those persons interviewed who lived in Yaounde through a coup observed no direct signs of hostility toward Europeans. To the contrary, they reported that their house guards became more protective than usual. The probability that Americans would be safe in a crisis is very high. Common sense and one's ability to judge a precarious situation will make a difference

An issue to consider in time of crisis is the underlying street level resentment of the "European." In general Americans are recognized as Americans, not Europeans, by their gracious attitude toward Cameroonians and Cameroonian law. If in a crisis, you lose your polite attitude, it would be to your detriment.

Some rules are universal. Keep handy the Family Liaison Office's publication, *Evacuation Plan, Don't Leave Home Without It*. Always keep your gas tank at least half full. Have a ready supply of potable water. In case of physical or political emergency, rules for dress remain previously described. Women and girls over 12 would not want to wear shorts or sun tops. Men might prefer to wear a tie. Camouflage army-navy type clothing are to be avoided by everyone, even children. Do not travel alone.

Corruption in Cameroon exists, and bribes of a lesser nature are also common. For example, if you are stopped on the road by the police or military, you can expect that the officer might angle for a bribe or gift. You can just as easily refuse. Do not assume that a bribe will be to your advantage. Indeed, it might seriously jeopardize your position.

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